*Hamlet* Passage Analysis Practice

Task: How does this soliloquy convey Hamlet's complex character? How does Shakespeare use literary devices to convey Hamlet's character?



*Hamlet* is perhaps one of the most complex characters in English literature. Shakespeare exposes layers upon layers of his personality; it is almost impossible to determine who the real Hamlet is as he is putting on numerous acts in order to carry out his revenge. Aside from being an ingenious and conniving character, Hamlet is also depressed, angry, and perhaps heartbroken. In his most famous soliloquy that begins, “To be or not to be,” Hamlet contemplates suicide and speculates on the importance of earthly life. Shakespeare uses pauses within lines and figurative language in this soliloquy to convey Hamlet’s complexity and his difficulty in understanding this illogical world.



As he begins his soliloquy, Hamlet pauses often. Shakespeare uses the em-dash five times in just the first nine lines. These pauses show that Hamlet is beginning to think deeply and needs time to gather his thoughts. Perhaps Shakespeare included this punctuation to make the actor aware that he should begin the soliloquy slowly, then rapidly pick up speed as he launches into a list of all of life’s tribulations. This elevation in quickness, and perhaps in tone as well, would further convey Hamlet’s insanity. The em dashes, both in their elongated look on the page and in the speaking pauses they signify, suggest that Hamlet is reluctant to come to an answer. He asks the questions, “To be or not to be—“ and “To die, to sleep–,” repeatedly before pursuing in fear of finding an answer. After all, “conscience does make cowards of us all.”



Shakespeare uses figurative language to convey Hamlet’s cryptic, seemingly illogical thinking. He establishes two major metaphors that are used throughout the soliloquy: water, and war. Without even looking into the use of these metaphors, the very natures of these two words contrast sharply. Hamlet compares life on Earth to a disastrous battle. Life is composed of “the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,” and all those living must “bear the whips and scores of time.” The more violent of the two metaphors, surprisingly, however, are the comparisons to water. Shakespeare uses water to symbolize the unknown and the events that would occur if one attempted to conquer his war-like life. In this battle, one would fight “against a sea of troubles.” In contemplating death over life, all seemingly important things would have “their currents turn awry.” The waters, in other words, would become stagnant. Shakespeare’s water metaphor is more terrifying than that of war because it represents the unknown, which Hamlet is frightened by most.



Shakespeare uses literary devices to convey Hamlet’s confusion and deep pondering. In his madness, and perhaps, in his sanity as well, Hamlet is unwilling and unable to answer his most threatening question: whether to live in misery, or die in uncertainty.



Hamlet’s “To be or not to be” soliloquy is among the most famous ever written. It conveys the struggles of the main character Hamlet, who contemplates suicide in order to deal with his tragic life. In the passage, Hamlet is divided; he argues the two sides of his dilemma aloud. The soliloquy conveys Hamlet’s complex character as one of his most tragic weaknesses. Hamlet’s use of metaphors, euphemisms, and parallel syntax show how Hamlet’s thought process is cumbersome.



Hamlet’s apt use of metaphors helps the audience truly visualize his struggle. The tortured prince opens with a daring metaphor comparing life to “the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune.” The metaphor illustrates Hamlet’s disdain for society. While he scorns life, he also entertains the possibility of conquering it: “to take arms against a sea of troubles / And, by opposing, end them” The sharp contrast between the two statements demonstrates the split in Hamlet’s personality; divided and without conviction, Hamlet is tortured by his over-analysis.



In order to more readily embrace the idea of death, Hamlet inspires himself by using euphemisms. The crazed Hamlet compares dying to sleeping, making it more understandable. He goes further to say, “To sleep, perchance to dream.” Hamlet’s cunning turns against him as he convinces himself that suicide is like falling asleep and dreaming; what would normally be a simple choice for many growls like a weed fed by the intricacies of Hamlet’s complex character.



The parallel sentence structure in the soliloquy reveals how Hamlet’s mind dwells on the negatives of life rather than the positives. He describes the failures of the government, the law, the proud man, and love consecutively, which creates an overwhelming effect of depression. By giving each phrase the same structure, the tragedies become compounded in Hamlet’s mind. His pessimism counteracts his primal urge to survive; and together the thoughts battle in his soul.



By the end of Hamlet’s soliloquy, he finally realizes that his analysis is his undoing. He recognizes that his constant thought nurtures inaction: “with this regard that currents turn awry/ and lose the name of action.” Just like a dying current, Hamlet has killed his ability to act by creating counterpoints to all of his arguments. The weight of his clever, yet complex character has become his undoing.



The “To be or not to be” soliloquy is one of Shakespeare’s most well-known, and also one of the most confusing and ambiguous. It may be read literally or as a metaphor, or as a call to action or as a condemnation of it. The speech is confusing on purpose. Shakespeare’s use of literary devices such as parallelism, diction, and logos captures Hamlet’s complex character and makes this soliloquy as relevant to ordinary life as it is to life on the edge of death.



As unsure as Hamlet is of the right course of action, his tone becomes even more confident about the fact that he is confused. Hamlet says “to die – to sleep” twice. Although the phrases are repeated exactly, their tones are different. The first time, Shakespeare uses two em-dashes, suggesting two pauses. Pauses suggest uncertainty. The second time, there is only one dash. Although Hamlet does pause here as well, the parallel structure of the repetition brings out the absences of the second dash. The second time Hamlet seems more sure of himself; sure of his confusion, if of nothing else. In this light, the soliloquy can be seen as a way for Hamlet to legitimize his lack of conviction. He practically bathes in it in the first half of the monologue.



Shakespeare’s diction conveys Hamlet’s frustration for all the world’s problems, not only his own. In the middle of the soliloquy, Hamlet lists a number of terrible issues, from “the oppressor’s wrong” to “the pangs of despised love.” He transitions smoothly from problems that have nothing to do with him to “despised love,” which is one of his greatest pains. The flow of these related and unrelated issues suggests that Hamlet has lost touch with his own reality. Not satisfied with bearing his own weight, he tries to hold up the world.



One of the most surprising elements of the monologue is its logical basis. Hamlet makes up for uncertainty by proving the facts conclusively. When Hamlet says, “’Tis a consummation / devoutly to be wished,” it is hard to argue with him based upon the reasons he gave in the preceding lines. Likewise, near the end, when he asks why we should “fly to others (i.e. other ills) we know not of,” his thinking is sound. Of course the two above conclusions contradict each other. Hamlet cannot yet unite them (in fact, it is impossible to do so). Shakespeare depicts Hamlet’s confusion most perfectly here: if Hamlet can sincerely argue two opposing points and come to a reasonable conclusion, he must be mad, or worse.



Hamlet achieves nothing for himself by reciting this soliloquy. However, he does communicate his thoughts to the audience. Perhaps it was Shakespeare’s intention to make the character more sympathetic. Although Hamlet gains nothing in the play, the audience gains a better understanding of the main character.

**More devices…**

Antithesis (opposing ideas in parallel structure/syntax)

Shakespeare also uses antithesis in the soliloquy to express Hamlet’s inner struggle. When he says, “to die, to sleep—“ he seems to be weighing the pros and cons of death, an eternal sleep, and life. These words echo Hamlet’s original question, “to be or not to be”…

Rhetorical Questions

Shakespeare begins Hamlet’s soliloquy with a defining question, a question that seems unanswerable to Hamlet at this point in the tragedy. As Hamlet attempts to answer his question, “To be or not to be –“ the reader can genuinely feel Hamlet’s melancholy. By the end of the soliloquy, Hamlet’s original question, the one he has tried to answer with so much effort, is unresolved. Hamlet’s suicidal contemplation turns into a philosophical discussion on the meaning of life. Although Hamlet does not commit suicide, the reader still does not know if he wants “to be or not.” In attempting to answer this overarching question, Hamlet proposes more rhetorical questions as he attempts to reconcile the struggles of earthly life. This only adds to Hamlet’s inner confusion, since he seems to mock the value of life in these questions, only to remain alive at the end of his soliloquy.

The infinitive

1. Shakespeare uses verbs in their infinitive form to illustrate Hamlet’s internal dilemma. The infinitive implies a more definite and decisive choice. Hamlet must decide “To be or not to be,” “to suffer,” “to die” or “to sleep.” Furthermore, he recognizes that whatever he decides will be permanent and will greatly affect the outcome of this dilemma. Knowing this, Hamlet feels trapped and is afraid to lock himself into actions he is still unsure of.

2. Hamlet constantly utters the seemingly unimportant word “to”: “to be or not to be,” “to die, to sleep,” “to suffer”, “or to take arms,” and many more. This constant use of “to” displays Hamlet’s most apparent problem: act or think? Hamlet contemplates every possible plan and each possible outcome. He constantly thinks, rethinks, then overthinks. Yet, seen by his repeated use of the action word “to,” he so desperately yearns for action and decision. However, he is paralyzed by his fears of what may come from his decision, a fear of the unknown also seen in this soliloquy in his consideration of “the undiscovered country.”

Synecdoche

Synecdoche serves to simplify certain connections Hamlet makes in the soliloquy, allowing him to jump from point to point in a scatter-brained fashion. This device, in which part of an idea or object is used to represent the whole, appears several times in the speech. For example, as Hamlet describes a state of death in which man has “shuffled off this mortal coil,” or when he describes “the thousand natural shocks / That flesh is heir to,” the “mortal coil” and “flesh,” both referring to the skin or physical qualities of man, are said to disintegrate. This disintegration of the physical is also meant to include the termination of thought and life altogether. The listing of complaints also refer to the larger wrongs of a number of institutions or ideas – the government, criminals, love – while only referring to a specific evil.